

Face Theory and Politicians: How Politicians Can Learn and Better Themselves After a Face
Threatening Act

Bennett Inman
Communication Theory
Dr. Toni Morgan
12 May 2022

Abstract

In this paper I will be discussing Face Theory and how it can be applied to political atmospheres, exploring the question “How Politicians Can Learn and Better Themselves After a Face Threatening Act.” Face can be defined as “how individuals construct their reality (Goffman, 1959), thus reflecting a social constructionist perspective that focuses on how relationships are created, sustained, and changed in interaction (Braithwaite et al., 2018).” I identified problems. Those problems were: They must understand that they are in the forefront of the public eye and with understanding face theory it will be beneficial to better themselves, Campaign staff and party leaders will be able to better understand and better communicate with voters if they know that the politician they are campaigning for is able to have a positive face when in the public eye, and If they are able to go about their work with no face threatening acts or a good response to face threatening acts they are much more likely to be taken seriously by peers and other politicians, ultimately being able to effectively change things for the better for all citizens. The recommendations that I came up with were: Recommendation 1: Acknowledge that holding public office comes with limitations, Recommendation 2: Engage in preventative facework and Recommendation 3: Engage in corrective facework. If you follow these steps, politicians will perform better, making a better society for all citizens of the United States.

Introduction

Fighting, gaslighting and getting nothing done. That is what a lot of people think of politics in the United States of America these days. We all hope and then go out to vote for change. Sometimes it happens and sometimes it does not. What if I told you that voting and hoping were not our only options to keep politicians in check? Throughout this paper I will explore the ideas of face theory and explain how politicians can better themselves after a bad situation, also known as a face threatening act. I first will explain the ideas behind face theory, then identify the problems that politicians face with the application of the theory, and finally I will give recommendations on how best to fix the problems that I identified, all in order to help politicians, official and campaign staff and most importantly the public.

Problem Identification

If one is engaged in politics or even watches the morning or nightly news we know that politicians getting in hot water is nothing new. From Watergate to Benghazi, politicians getting themselves in trouble is one thing that is bipartisan these days. Everyone makes mistakes, we are all human, but it seems that once mistakes are made, no action is taken to save face. We get a good amount of lying and shifting, but nothing extremely concrete. Through research and application to Face Theory, I have identified different problems to better understand the process of saving face with the remedies to save face from face threatening acts.

Face Theory

Face theory is present in every human's life, no matter if you know it or not. According to Miller-Ott & Alcarez (2022) face is “how individuals construct their reality (Goffman, 1959), thus reflecting a social constructionist perspective that focuses on how relationships are created, sustained, and changed in interaction (Braithwaite et al., 2018).” You can almost think of face as

manors. You want people to see you as good and you want to present yourself well in order to build relationships with others. It affects our everyday lives by the acts of humans doing things that now seem ordinary. For example, when you go to a job interview you dress nice and speak professionally. You try to show you belong.

Face Theory (Miller-Ott & Alvarez, 2022) can be applied to many events that each and every person has to deal with in our day-to-day interactions. For individuals that are in a public light this could not be more true as they have a much larger crowd that they are looking to please. Specifically, I will be looking at how politicians are able to use Face Theory to make themselves look better in the public eye.

To understand how politicians use this theory we must understand the terminology that goes along with the theory. People can have their face needs met or threatened through two different kinds of face, positive and negative face. Positive face is “The desire to be accepted and deemed worthy by others.” (Morgan, 2022) while Negative face is “The desire to be free from imposition from others and the desire to be able to make your own choices; autonomy” (Morgan, 2022). For example, let's remember back to high school when you were trying to impress your crush. Through positive face you would hope that your crush would love the brand new outfit that you are wearing to impress them. On the other hand, though negative face, you would feel little pressure from your crush, you wanted to wear your new outfit for you, and you really don't care what anyone thinks of it, including your crush.

When we are looking at public figures like politicians, it is safe to assume that Negative face needs will rarely be met, as they are in the public eye and everything they do and say has the potential of being used against them for political gain. In this way, they are constantly subjected to control and influence from others. Politicians are also doing a job of representing their

constituents, therefore have given up some privacy to do so. On the other hand, politicians are looking to have a good Positive face, as this will be advantageous to them when trying to get elected and to enact policy that they see beneficial to the people.

A face threatening act “challenges a person’s face performance, which might result in embarrassment” (Miller-Ott, 2022, p. 174). The majority of what we see with people looking to run for public office and that are in public office is a face threatening act called impropriety meaning “engaging in a socially inappropriate behavior” (Buss, 1980).

Face threatening acts are very common in this era more so than other eras, as we have social media and other tools that will be able to spread impropriety much faster than previously thought. It also is much easier to fact check, as if a video or picture is out in the public, you can not deny that the allegation happened, but only look to save face after. For example, just in recent weeks Rep. Madison Cawthorn was exposed in an inappropriate video of him making sexual gestures while naked in years past on a vacation. The video evidence could not be denied, so he pivoted and blamed cancel culture and the political left for dragging up anything that could get him to be viewed negatively.

Implications for Politicians, Campaign Staff, and Official Staff

Throughout my research I have found that the target audience for this information can vary depending on who the person is reading this information. First, politicians can use this information, second, individuals that are trying to get a politician elected can use this information, AKA campaign staff, third, individuals trying to help politicians enact good policy can use this information, AKA official staff.

First, Politicians can use the following recommendations to save face. They must understand that they are in the forefront of the public eye and with understanding face theory it

will be beneficial to better themselves. When they defend themselves against face threatening acts well, this can grow support among partisan voters who align with their political beliefs. They also can gain support from independents if they show grace in handling bad situations. Many people look for leaders that can not only solve problems, but they look for leaders that can handle extremely hard situations.

Second, individuals that are trying to get a politician elected can use the following recommendations. Campaign staff and party leaders will be able to better understand and better communicate with voters if they know that the politician they are campaigning for is able to have a positive face when in the public eye. If they know that they can survive face-threatening situations they are better able to defend themselves and defend the candidate as the public will have more confidence. The ultimate goal of these campaign staff members is to get a politician elected so they can continue with the work they want to be done, and with a better understanding of face theory they can use it and understand how the individual they are working for uses it.

Problem Significance

Individuals trying to help politicians enact good policy can use this information. Official staff and the politicians are looking to better understand the public and the people they represent each and every day. If they are able to go about their work with no face threatening acts or a good response to face threatening acts they are much more likely to be taken seriously by peers and other politicians, ultimately being able to effectively change things for the better for all citizens.

Recommendations

After looking at what the research says about the issues of Face threatening acts we must understand that next step that needs to be taken. In this situation one must use the research to learn and then furthermore give recommendations on what steps should be taken when a politician is looking to save face in a hard time. In the following section, I will present three recommendations for saving face when trouble arises, including acknowledging the limitations of holding public office, engaging in preventative facework, and engaging in corrective facework.

Recommendation 1: Acknowledge that holding public office comes with limitations

First and foremost, politicians must understand that when they hold public office, this will be inherently limiting to what they can do or say. According to face theory, this involves negative face, which is “The desire to be free from imposition from others and the desire to be able to make your own choices; autonomy” (Morgan, 2022). Once an individual makes a decision to jump into the public light, having complete freedom and autonomy over one’s life is not very realistic, as the public must see and understand where politicians stand on the issues, along with identifying a politician as being ethical enough to be the voice of them in public office. This is different from a private citizen. They can say or do something that is questionable but are not held at the same standards as politicians. For example, if a private citizen is drunk at the local fair, it may be frowned upon but overall no action will be taken. On the other hand, if a politician was drunk at the local fair, some individuals may question the ethics of this individual or even question if they are fit for office or not.

For example, William Benoit (2017) in his article “Image Repair on the Donald Trump “Access Hollywood” Video: “Grab Them by the P****” looked into former President Donald

Trump's image repair once recordings surfaced of him saying “Grab them by the p****”. Then candidate Trump should have known that his past could leak into the future and that appalling language like this may come to the forefront. If Trump was a private citizen, things would be handled much differently. First, we could question that this tape would even come out. Second, a private citizen could have his reputation ruined by a select few people that have heard the awful language, but Trump was judged by all of the United States of America. Scale is a lot different, and the consequences could live up to that scale. Because of this, I recommend that each candidate that is looking to run for office should hire someone who will carry out a vetting process and that will know of these things before they come to public light. It is then the job of these individuals to have a plan on how to save face and make the candidate look the best that they can in a situation where a face threatening act has occurred.

Recommendation 2: Engage in preventative facework

Second, a candidate must use the act of preventive facework before taking action on running for an office or while they are in office. Preventive facework can be described as a process where “an individual can avert face-threats by avoiding social situations or conversational topics that likely lead to face loss” (Miller-Ott & Alvarez, 2022). For example, if a politician knows that they are going to run for office soon, they may choose to go quiet on the social scene for a bit in order to stay out of scandal. You can look at President Joe Biden’s 2020 campaign. Biden spent much of his time indoors, as Covid-19 was still largely a threat in the United States. His voter base also saw Covid-19 as a threat, and were largely also staying socially distant from others. Biden avoided social situations not only for his safety, but in order to prevent face loss, as his voter base would have been upset if he was telling people to stay home and then he would turn around and run all over the place. Obviously, someone in the

public eye can not do this completely, but they can take action to control messaging when it comes to preventive facework.

The first part of preventive facework is avoiding social situations that may be especially face-threatening to the politician. This is impossible to do because they are responsible for being engaging with the public and helping constituents with day to day needs. However, we can still learn from this. A politician should never be in a social situation that they can not control. When making appearances to the public it should always be the job of the staff for that politician to set them up for success; you must control your environment. The second part of this strategy is to avoid controversial topics. This is a strategy that can be hard to enact, but with certain crowds you do not want to bring up certain topics. For example, if you are a Republican running for a statewide race in Wisconsin, you will talk about the topic of school choice in Milwaukee county, while you will talk about 2nd amendment rights in Taylor county. Again, this is impossible to do completely, but with good communication staffers, you must do the best that you can to control the narrative between the politicians and others. This means that staff should brief the politician on each and everything that is relevant, including current events. This also means that they need to schedule as many opportunities as possible to talk on issues that they want to talk about, as often that is what people want to talk to you about.

For example, with personal experience as a member of a campaign staff, we did this very often. As recently as this semester I used these strategies to protect myself and my boss from face threatening acts. The campaign had just launched and many members of the media were looking to ask questions that we were not ready to respond to as it was early in the campaign. We had a kick off event where the media and the public were invited, but we had the media separate from the candidate. Two members of the media tried to blend in as members of the public to

bombard the candidate with questions following his speech. However, we controlled our environment and knew that these individuals were members of the media and removed them to the media area. In this same situation we were not ready to have this dialogue and we in change controlled the narrative by removing the members of the media to the correct place.

Recommendation 3: Engage in corrective facework

Third, an individual that is going to enter a public space to try and become a politician must know how to use corrective facework correctly, or must have someone on staff that will be able to handle corrective facework. Corrective facework can be described as “wherein they experience and acknowledge a face-threat and work to counter the effects of the face loss” (Miller-Ott & Alvarez, 2022). This in the eyes of politics can be hard to do, as it usually means that one must admit that they were in the wrong or did something unethical in nature. However, there is a time and place where you must swallow your pride and take responsible action for the wrongs that they have done. Two recommendations that I have for a politician (or staff) in these situations; 1. Don’t lie, 2. Take action early and stick to the same message

For an individual to lie about an unfortunate situation makes the people look more unethical than already portrayed. For example, former Congressman Anthony Weiner was accused of sending sexually explicit pictures via twitter messages. J. Scott Smith (2016) looked into this case in his article “With a Little Help From My Wife: An Examination of Anthony Weiner’s Image Repair Discourse Through Third-Party Defense and a Postcrisis Discourse of Renewal” and expanded on these issues. After sending the sexually explicit photo, Weiner denied doing so. He went on with lies for weeks, but other individuals came forward to report that he engaged in similar acts with them. He eventually came forward and was encouraged to resign his seat in Congress, which he eventually did. It was already a bad act to do send sexually

explicit pictures on Twitter. We also must look at the fact that Weiner was married and that when this came to the public eye he denied the allegations. Lying made his situation worse, as even members from his own party encouraged him to step down from his seat after it came to light that he was not truthful about his situation. When you are caught, you are out of options and at that point it is in the best interest of the politician and their constituents to save face as best as possible.

Taking action early is also important as it shapes how you sound going forward when faced with a face threatening act. Corrective facework was seen when Hillary Clinton was studied by Corey B. Davis (2013) in his article “An inconvenient vote: Hillary Clinton’s Iraq war image repair debate strategies and their implications for representative democracy”. Davis points out that Clinton did not comment right away after she was put under scrutiny about supporting war measures in Iraq. When she did not respond right away, it made her look weak on the issue and that she did not have an opinion on such a hot button issue. She also did not stay on message. She supported the war as a sitting Senator and at the start of her 2008 presidential primary run and then later flipped to not supporting the war in Iraq. Her first reaction once she had changed positions should have been to admit it. Once she had admitted that she had changed positions then she would tell why, and finally she should have given her new position so voters were informed. Instead she danced around the issue and confused voters on where she really stood on the issue of the war in Iraq. Since she did not act fast and did not stay on message she failed to use positive corrective facework and later went on to losing the Democratic primary to Barack Obama.

Conclusion

Overall, the recommendations that are seen in connection to face theory and defending against face threatening acts can be talked about and debated by many people. I think that one recommendation is, however, non debatable. This recommendation is that all politicians staff individuals that understand all the aspects and ins and outs of face theory. When looking at my recommendations, it is clear that if staff members understand face theory, they will understand how to deal with face threatening acts and overall will be able to help the politicians they are working for be successful in whatever capacity that they deem acceptable.

Bibliography

Benoit, W. (2017). Image repair on the donald trump “access hollywood” video: “grab them by the p*ssy.” *Communication Studies*, 68(3), 243–259.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2017.1331250>

Benoit, W. L. (2006). President Bush's image repair effort on meet the press : The complexities of defeasibility. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 34(3), 285–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880600771635>

Benoit, W. L. (2014). President Barack Obama's image repair on healthcare.gov. *Public Relations Review*, 40(5), 733–738. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.07.003>

Braithwaite, D. O., Schrodtt, P., Miller-Ott, A. E., & Alvarez, C. F. (2022). Face Theory: The Ongoing Performances of Our Lives. In *Engaging theories in interpersonal communication multiple perspectives* (pp. 171–181). essay, Routledge.

Davis, C. B. (2013). An inconvenient vote: Hillary Clinton's Iraq War Image Repair debate strategies and their implications for representative democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 315–319. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.07.008>

Laustsen, L., & Petersen, M. B. (2015). Winning faces vary by ideology: How nonverbal source cues influence election and communication success in politics. *Political Communication*, 33(2), 188–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2015.1050565>

Morgan , T. (2022). *Face Theory* . Lecture, De Pere ; St. Norbert Collge .

Shukla, S., & Shukla, R. (2020). The pragmatics of Indian political apologies: Sorry, but not sorry. *Discourse & Society*, 31(6), 648–669.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520939688>

Smith, J. S. (2016). With a Little Help From My Wife: An Examination of Anthony Weiner's Image Repair Discourse Through Third-Party Defense and a Postcrisis Discourse of Renewal. *Northwest Journal of Communication*.